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PM says GDP growth in first quarter encouraging

• Claims govt pulled country back from brink of default • Highlights PIA privatisation as major reform milestone • Expresses satisfaction over economic and strategic ties with Saudi Arabia

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Friday said that significant growth in the country's GDP during the first quarter (July-Sept) of the current fiscal year was encouraging, noting that the government had steered Pakistan from the brink of default towards economic stability.

Chairing a meeting of the federal cabinet at the Prime Minister's House, he said that soon after assuming office, the incumbent government resolved to privatise loss-making state-owned enterprises.

"The privatisation of Pakistan International Airline (PIA) is an extremely important milestone in this regard," he said, adding that the move was part of the government's broader vision for economic reforms.

The prime minister expressed satisfaction over the successful privatisation of 75 per cent shares of PIA, stating that the bidding process remained extremely transparent.

He also described his recent meetings with United Arab Emirates President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan as highly beneficial for bilateral relations and mutual consultation.

The prime minister said that a day earlier he had a pleasant telephone conversation with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman, during which both sides expressed satisfaction over the pace of economic and strategic cooperation between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

He added that discussions were also held on further broadening bilateral relations.

On the occasion, the prime minister congratulated members of the federal cabinet on the New Year and extended his best wishes.

The cabinet endorsed the decisions taken in the meeting of the Cabinet Committee for Legislative Cases (CCLC) held on December 30, 2025, including confirmation of action regarding the Islamabad Capital Territory Local Government (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025. It also endorsed the decisions made at the CCLC meeting held on December 3, 2025.

The cabinet further approved decisions taken at the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) meeting held on August 26, 2025, including approval of relief for electricity consumers of distribution companies concerning the Off-Grid (Captive Power Plant) Levy and the formulation of a strategy in this regard.

Additionally, the cabinet approved action for the issuance of a Presidential Ordinance to amend the Off-Grid (Captive Power Plants) Levy Act, 2025, allowing the sale of gas to off-grid captive power plants by a third party, on the recommendation of the Petroleum Division.—APP

SUKKUR: Sewage is piled up at Ghanta Ghar Chowk, showing negligence on part of municipal authorities.—PPI

ECP sends notice to KP CM's adviser over Haripur by-poll allegations

Terms Shafiullah Jan's accusations 'baseless', asks him to explain position in seven days

By Iftikhar A. Khan

ISLAMABAD: The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) on Friday sent a notice to Shafiullah Jan, an adviser to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief minister, seeking an explanation for his statement blaming the electoral body for irregularities during the Haripur by-election last year, according sources.

During a press conference on Dec 19, Mr Jan blamed the ECP for electoral irregularities, and claimed that Form 47 was issued from Islamabad instead of the returning officer's office.

"This was a singular yet bizarre event in the country's history, when a Form-47 was issued from Islamabad," he had said, adding that "ECP didn't upload all Form-45s from 602 polling stations in the constituency, nor could the PML-N produce all Form-45s from 602 polling stations".

According to the sources, the ECP in its notice stated that "baseless" allegations were made against the commission concerning the conduct of the Haripur by-election, including the issuance of Form-47 from Islamabad, non-uploading of Form-45 on its website, and other claims of irregularities.

They added that the electoral body had reviewed the matter and "is of the considered view that allegations made in the said statement are incorrect, misleading, and not supported by any evidence".

The sources said that such statements, when made publicly without any verifiable evidence, create "unnecessary confusion and adversely affect public confidence" in the electoral process. "It appears to be an attempt to malign the institution."

Shafiullah Jan has been directed to explain his position regarding the statements he made and provide "concrete and verifiable" evidence to support his claim within the next seven days.

Appropriate action, in accordance with the law, will be taken against Mr Jan if he fails to provide evidence during the stipulated time period, the sources said.

In November, by-elections were held for six national and seven provincial assembly seats, in which the PML-N secured all the seats except one. However, the opposition PTI alleged rigging and rejected the results.

For the NA-18 (Haripur) seat, PTI-backed independent candidate Shehrnaz Omar Ayub, wife of former opposition leader Omar Ayub, was defeated by PML-N's Babar Nawaz.

The seat was vacated by Omar Ayub Khan upon his disqualification by the ECP over convictions in various cases.

The Free and Fair Election Network, an electoral monitoring body, also reported that by-elections were marred by "recurring violations" of campaigning restrictions and "gaps" in results transparency.

Ambreen Jan becomes first woman to head Pemra

By Kalbe Ali

ISLAMABAD: Ambreen Jan, a former federal secretary for information, has been selected as the new chairperson of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Pemra), becoming the first woman to head the electronic media regulator.

A former Grade-22 officer, Ms Jan brings decades of administrative and policy experience to the position.

In addition to serving as secretary information, she has held several key posts, including director general of Radio Pakistan and managing director of PTV.

She also served as press counsellor in Dhaka, Bangladesh, during the period of strained bilateral relations from 2011 to 2018.

A graduate of Kinnaird College in Lahore, she has been awarded the Sitara-i-Imtiaz by the government.

Ambreen Jan was among five shortlisted candidates considered for the post, along with retired Brigadier Anwar Ahmed, Mateen Haider, Irfan Ashraf and Dr Hamid Khan.

AMBREEN Jan

The selection was made during a meeting of a parliamentary committee convened for the purpose.

Following the committee's unanimous approval, Ms Jan's name has been forwarded by the Ministry of Information to the president for final approval through the Prime Minister's Office.

After weeks of waiting, GB gets 14-member caretaker cabinet

PML-N leader claims 'merit, agreed-upon criteria' ignored while selecting certain individuals for the interim set-up

By Jamil Nagri

GILGIT: Five weeks after the appointment of an interim chief minister, the Gilgit-Baltistan Council notified a 14-member caretaker cabinet, including two advisers, on Friday.

The appointments were made by PM Shehbaz Sharif, in his capacity as head of the GB Council on the advice of caretaker CM retired Justice Yar Muhammad, under Article 48-A(2) of the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan Order, 2018.

The 12 ministers are Sajid Ali Baig, Engineer Altaf Hussain, Ghulam Abbas, retired Col Akbar Ismail, Meher Dad, Sharafat Din, Maulana Sarwar Shah, Raja Shehbaz Khan, Mumtaz Hussain, Dr Niaz Ali, Syed Adil Shah and Bahadur Ali, while Syeda Fatima and Abdul Hakeem have been appointed advisers.

It is worth noting that the territory's chief election commissioner had recently announced that GB Assembly and local government elections will be conducted in April or May 2026.

He said the long-delayed LG elections would be held on a party basis. The five-year tenure of the GB Assembly was completed on Nov 24, and caretaker Chief Minister Yar Muhammad was sworn in on Nov 26.

The appointment of the caretaker set-up had earlier been mired in controversy, as PML-N GB president and former chief minister Hafeezur Rehman had raised concerns over the inclusion of certain individuals in the cabinet.

Speaking to the media on Thursday, he claimed that merit had been ignored while nominating members for the caretaker set-up.

He said that the caretaker cabinet should have representation from all districts and ethnicities of the region, but alleged that some appointees were affiliated with political parties and belonged to specific areas.

He expressed concern that the inclusion of controversial figures could raise questions about the fairness and transparency of upcoming elections.

Mr Rehman said it was previously agreed that the 14-member cabinet would include representatives from all 10 districts, and that no individual who had previously been part of a government or affiliated with a political party would be appointed.

He said that recommending members from certain areas and appointing controversial individuals violated the criteria for a caretaker government.

UK honours Pakistan-born surgeon with OBE

By Our Correspondent

LONDON: A Pakistan-born cardiothoracic surgeon working in the United Kingdom has been named in the New Year Honours List, receiving the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his distinguished professional achievements and humanitarian work.

Professor Syed Saeed Ashraf, a consultant cardiothoracic surgeon at Morriston Hospital in Swansea, Wales, was awarded for services to cardiac surgery, the training of overseas surgeons and his academic contributions.

Swansea Bay University Health Board announced the honour on New Year's Eve, describing Dr Ashraf as an outstanding clinician who extends life-saving expertise to developing countries.

Dr Ashraf regularly uses his annual leave to perform voluntary, complex heart operations at the National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases in Karachi, Pakistan.

He primarily treats young patients suffering from rheumatic valvular heart disease — a condition now rare in Western countries but prevalent in South Asia — and Afghan refugees receiving free care in Pakistan.

During one six-week mission, Dr Ashraf worked seven days a week, dedicating Sundays to training Pakistani and Afghan surgeons in wet labs. Many of these trainees have since returned to peripheral hospitals, expanding the reach of specialised care.

"I am deeply honoured and humbled to receive this OBE," Dr Ashraf said. "This recognition reflects not only my work but also the support and dedication of my family, colleagues and mentors."

Richard Evans, executive medical director at Swansea Bay University Health Board, said Dr Ashraf's commitment to delivering procedures in underserved regions is "truly inspiring".

Mr Ashraf described his visits as a way of "giving something back" to the country where he began his medical career.

AJK govt claims 'over 90pc progress' on pact with Awami Action Committee

• PM stresses need for resolving issues through dialogue, warns against chaos in the state • Minister says govt withdrew 177 of 192 FIRs registered against protesters, paid compensation to families of those killed in October incidents • Points out Centre assured Rs10bn for upgrading electricity system

By Tariq Naqash

MUZAFFARABAD: The Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) government on Friday claimed it had resolved or was moving towards resolution of more than 90 per cent of the issues agreed upon with the Jammu and Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee (JKJAAC), less than two months after assuming office.

Prime Minister Raja Faisal Mumtaz Rathore made the claim during a multimedia briefing for journalists on the clause-by-clause implementation of the 39-point agreement with the rights movement. The briefing was held at the PM office soon after the fifth cabinet meeting.

The premier was accompanied by Finance and Inland Revenue Minister Chaudhry Qasim Majeed, Information and Religious Affairs Minister Rafique Nair, Elementary and Secondary Education Minister Deevan Ali Khan Chughtai, Chief Secretary Khushal Khan and other senior officials.

FLANKED by three cabinet members and the chief secretary, AJK Prime Minister Raja Faisal Mumtaz Rathore speaks to journalists during a briefing on implementation of an agreement with JKJAAC.—Photo by the writer

"The issues that had pushed people onto the streets were made our top priority from day one, and we did not waste a moment in taking steps in the public interest," the prime minister said, adding that his government took office on Nov 17 and had since worked to restore public confidence in the political system.

He said a widening gap between the government and the public during the previous regime had been bridged through dialogue and engagement, and stressed that his government would not allow any atmosphere of chaos in the state. "This state can no longer afford the loss of lives," he said.

"Even the most serious problems can be resolved through dialogue, provided it is practical and based on facts," he added.

Describing members of the JKJAAC as "our own people," Mr Rathore said his government had no ego and remained committed to addressing public grievances, including issues beyond the agreement. He said the doors of the Prime Minister's Office, ministers and the bureaucracy were open to the public, and announced that an investment conference before the upcoming free and fair general elections would be held in the state.

Taking the floor after his remarks, Mr Majeed, a member of the government's negotiating team, said that under the agreement, the government had withdrawn 177 of 192 FIRs registered against protesters, paid compensation to families of those killed or injured in the October 2025 incidents, and provided jobs to next of kin of the deceased.

He added that all government employees suspended for participating in the movement had also been reinstated.

He said judicial commissions were being formed to review FIRs related to fatalities and incidents in several districts, while a monitoring and implementation committee had been constituted and had already held its first meeting to regularly assess progress on the agreement.

The minister said the cabinet had approved the issuance of health cards, the establishment of two additional boards of intermediate and secondary education for Muzaffarabad and Poonch divisions, and amendments to the local government law, though the latter matter was pending before the high court.

He added that a committee comprising ministers and student representatives had been formed to work on the restoration of student unions and to propose a code of conduct.

Mr Majeed said the federal government had assured Rs10 billion for upgrading the electricity system, while PC-Is worth Rs5.5bn had been approved for installing MRI and CT scan machines in district hospitals. He said a chief executive officer had been appointed for the Universal Service Fund to improve cellular and internet connectivity in AJK, adding that feasibility studies had been completed or were under way for major water supply schemes across the state.

Continuing, he said the government had retained a 20-member cabinet in line with the agreement and rationalised departments accordingly.

Referring to financial reforms, he said the government had provided Rs2.9bn to the Bank of AJK to help it meet the requirements for scheduling, and that the bank's digital application would be launched soon. Some demands, including the abolition of advance tax, required further review due to their fiscal impact, he said, adding that consultations with the JKJAAC were continuing.

Both the premier and the finance minister expressed gratitude to the president, the prime minister and the government of Pakistan, as well as the PPP chairman and national institutions for their cooperation in implementing the agreement.